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Why We Need the Real History of the Kennedy Assassination

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By Jefferson Morley

AFTER 33 years the discussion of the Kennedy assassination is stuck between the myth of the "lone nut" and the myth of conspiracy. The huge accumulation of facts about Nov. 22, 1963 amounts to something more than trivia but less than historical truth. Consensus, after a third of a century, remains elusive.

Indeed, since the bitter debate around Oliver Stone's conspiratorial 1991 film "JFK," the very idea of a consensus history of the Kennedy assassination has sounded quaint. In general, the notion that one version of history can suit all parties concerned has become embattled since the cultural convulsions of the 1960s. In the particular case of the murdered president, what possible telling could possibly satisfy all? A majority of

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Americans, according to polls, are convinced or strongly suspect there was a conspiracy. Many leading opinion makers at news media organizations and some historians assure us that there is no credible evidence of such. And never the twain shall meet.

Yet we are closer than ever to having a firm factual basis for an assassination consensus. The JFK Assassination Records Act, passed unanimously by Congress in 1992, has resulted in the release of hundreds of thousands of pages of assassination-related documents since 1993. A five-member civilian review board, under the capable leadership of a federal judge, John Tunheim, has ordered the disclosure of another 2,000 documents. The board continues to take depositions and to pursue records that the FBI, the CIA, the National Security Agency and other federal entities want to keep secret.

Still, many tough-minded partisans who have dominated both sides of the JFK debate for years say that seeking assassination consensus is a fool's errand. The conspiracy theorists (or the

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KENNEDY, From C1

government's apologists) are emotionally and intellectually incapable of accepting the overwhelming evidence of Lee Harvey Oswald's sole guilt (or the existence of conspiracy). So why bother?

We should bother because of the undiminished centrality of Nov. 22, 1963 in the American imagination. The Kennedy assassination is a factor in the crisis of legitimacy that now undermines the U.S. government's ability to address a wide variety of public ills. In 1964, the first year that the government failed to offer a convincing account of the president's murder, 76 percent of the American people had a great deal of confidence in their government; in 1996, the figure is 19 percent. The inability of the government to present a credible explanation of how Kennedy was killed is not the only nor the most important reason for this decline. But it surely has played a role. Reaching a common understanding about the causal chain of events leading to Kennedy's murder would

be an important symbolic step toward restoring faith in American democracy.

We should *not* bother to reach a consensus out of fear that hypothetical persons complicit in President Kennedy's murder are a menace to democracy today. This is the paranoid position. It might have been a highly plausible feeling in the tumult of the '60s and '70s and a useful corrective to the patriotic excesses of the '80's. But, with the end of the Cold War, assassination paranoia, like assassination secrecy, is hard to justify. With the Cold War over, we should be confident enough as a country to face our once-secret history—without prejudice, denial or paranoia.

We need to take stock of what the nation's confusion and doubt about Kennedy's murder means. When CBS News pollsters found that 49 percent of people surveyed in 1993 said they believed the CIA was involved in the Kennedy assassination, they are not weighing in with finely-tuned assessment of the evidence about what happened in Dallas that day. Rather, the people are using the Kennedy assassi-

nation to dramatize their suspicions of the most secretive components of the national security bureaucracy. These suspicions continue to resonate today; witness how willing some people are to believe allegations that the CIA foisted the crack cocaine epidemic on America in the 1980s. Dismissal of such fears is a sure-fire recipe for deepening popular contempt for the already much-abused democratic process.

The view of many national media commentators is that the American people are slightly paranoid, irrationally suspicious of their government, misled by demagogues. This view is particularly evident in the comments of leading East Coast journalists over the years. From retired Washington Post editor Ben Bradlee to CBS anchorman Dan Rather; from conservative columnist George Will to liberal scribe Anthony Lewis; from the late leftist muckraker I.F. Stone to the right-wing philosopher William F.

Buckley, there is widespread agreement: The government's official version of Kennedy's murder has some flaws, but it is ultimately irrational to reject its essential conclusion. A lone nut, no one else, was responsible. Arguments to the contrary are but illustration of the paranoid style in American politics.

By contrast, the West Coast media elites (i.e., Hollywood) are more in step with public opinion. Stone's "JFK" is but one of a generation of feature films that portray the hidden hand of undemocratic forces lurking behind the facade of official history. In the 1993 film "In the Line of Fire," Clint Eastwood played an aging Secret Service agent haunted by his own failure to react quickly to the gunfire in Dealey Plaza. Decades later, he finds himself taunted by another would-be presidential assassin, a renegade CIA "wet boy," the movie's term for a trained killer. He may

tion thriller was a huge hit.

When serious journalists have ventured into this tricky territory to present and analyze new evidence made public since 1993, they have gotten comparatively little attention. For example, "Oswald Talked," a provocative book by journalists Ray and Mary LaFontaine of Dallas, was published earlier this year and went unreviewed anywhere in the national media. Maybe I am biased because I edited an article the LaFontaines wrote for Outlook about their findings. But the judicious findings of Evan Thomas, the Washington bureau chief of Newsweek and no conspiracy theorist, also attracted little comment.

In his recent book about the CIA, "The Very Best Men," Thomas laid out the sometimes curious actions of top CIA officials before and after

found its place in American history.

Is consensus possible? I believe it is, if public discussion can follow a few basic principles as the full historical record continues to emerge.

First, it's time to let go of the simplistic "conspiracy vs. lone nut" paradigm which both the tabloids and the mainstream media habitually use to frame the JFK debate. This dialog of the deaf was the result of the government's secrecy about the assassination and its investigatory aftermath. Now that the shroud of secrecy is finally being lifted by the review board, the "lone nut-conspiracy" polemics are passe.

Second, we need to forge a common understanding of Kennedy's death that unites, not divides, the American people. Any such understanding must begin with the common sense observation of the respected Cold War historian Michael Beschloss: that the most likely explanation for the cause of Kennedy's death lies in his policies. We must obtain documents, known to exist but still secret, about Kennedy's covert policies toward Cuba and organized crime; about the CIA and FBI's knowledge of the persons involved in these covert policies who were in Dallas in late 1963 and who had contact the accused assassin; about the withholding of such information from assassination investigators. In pursuing this search, we should not scapegoat any persons, groups, political creeds or institutions.

Third, we need to respect the complexity of history. There is no longer any doubt that Lee Harvey Oswald suddenly became a figure of strong interest to CIA-funded anti-Castro Cubans and a small group of senior CIA officials in the four months before the assassination. Some of the Cubans and Americans involved have talked about this. Win Scott, the head of the CIA station in



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be a "lone nut" but Eastwood angrily realizes that the agency bears institutional responsibility for him. This rumination on the legacy of Nov. 22, 1963 in the guise of a multiplex ac-

NOV. 22, 1963 and added a variety of interesting details from previously unavailable sources. He concluded that "there is no evidence that the CIA itself somehow became sucked into an assassination conspiracy," a formulation that tacitly accepts the possibility that persons not institutionally affiliated with the CIA did plot. Thomas's finding can certainly be debated, but it is reasonably stated and defensible—the sort of proposition that can help build consensus.

The paranoid stance of many (but not all) JFK conspiracy theorists is less helpful. The entrepreneurs who traffic in JFK speculation (the chauffeur did it, the three tramps did it, Jimmy Hoffa did it, the Freemasons did it) have trivialized history. They have played fast and loose with the evidence, and with the reputations of people who assuredly had nothing to do with Kennedy's murder.

It is understandable that some people have grown weary of the "Who Shot JFK?" debate. The vast majority of American adults—concerned but not crazy, interested but not obsessed—have no reason to be satisfied with the competing mythologies of the Kennedy assassination story. The notion that Oswald acted alone has high-level validation but little persuasive power. The notion of dirty tricks around Kennedy's murder has persuasive power but lacks coherence and has little official validation. One of the most shocking moments in American life still has not

an unpublished memoir suppressed by the agency until 1993. A retired senior CIA counterintelligence officer whom I interviewed in 1994 spoke of a "keen interest" in Oswald's Cuba-related activities. Thus the gunfire in Dealey Plaza, no matter who perpetrated it, represented an extraordinary failure in national security intelligence-gathering and dissemination. We cannot understand this failure—and the cover-up of it—until we see all the decisions that went into it.

Fourth, only the American people

can make certain that all documents are released. Some will argue that all the information relevant to Kennedy's murder was voluntarily released by executive branch agencies years ago and that the remaining top secret documents are irrelevant to the judgment of history. We should not be willfully naive.

The FBI, and to a lesser extent the CIA, are still resisting the review board's declassification orders. With a staff of only 25 and funding that is scheduled to run out in less than a year, the review board is not likely to win its ongoing disputes

with Executive Branch agencies. Unless it has strong support from the public and the media.

There is still much work to be done to catalog and analyze the new evidence but the grounds for consensus are now emerging. The story of the Kennedy assassination and the mystery that has surrounded it for the last 33 years is not a saga of an immense and monolithic conspiracy. Nor is it simply the tale of a lone nut. Rather it is a chapter in the history of the Cold War, a cautionary tale for the next generation of Americans about the perils of secrecy in a democracy.